arglebargle!

friday, july 13, 2007

Charles Lane Dead at 102

Last Sunday I told my wife that we should write a movie script, get Charles Lane to star in it and call it "The Man Who Plumb Fergot To Die"...And then on Monday he did just that.

Guess I spoke too soon.

Yes, it's true...enigmatic Curmudgeon Charles Lane, one of the only surviving stars of *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad, World* passed away July 9th, 2007.

Born Charles Gerstle Levinson January 26 1905, Lane was one of the few people still around who had lived through the devastating 1906 Earthquake in San Francisco. Lane first got the acting bug as a young man at the Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco. A young Rabbi there at the time had an interest in the theater, so the Temple had a theater program for young people and Lane played there. Later Lane refined his skills at the Pasadena Playhouse which was widely considered the best training and launching place for actors in what was then Hollywood's Golden age. It was here that he met and married his only wife, a stage actress named Ruth Covell in 1931.

His career spanning more than 60 years is longer than my arm. He appeared in upwards of 500

about me

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Television shows and features, including such classics *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *You Can't take it with You,* and *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington.* Yep, Capra used him a lot. In fact one of Lane's most cherished possessions, was a letter from the fabled director declaring, "Well, Charlie, you've been my No. 1 crutch."
He specialized in playing no-nonsense authority figures such as doctors, reporters, judges, lawyers, IRS agents, bankers, irate board members, and policemen.

Lane was also an avid golfer who felt like the only downside to his working so much was that it cut into his golf game. He won several trophies for his skills on the green.

Lane is probably best remembered for his TV roles in the 1960s, particularly the scheming scrooge-like railroad agent Homer Bedloe on the Paul Henning comedy *Petticoat Junction.*
All of the Henning CBS shows (which included the *Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres)* seemed to exist in their own universe so there were frequent character cross-overs from show to show, so Lane wound up playing Bedloe on *The Beverly Hillbillies* as well. After *Petticoat Junction* was canceled Lane wound up playing a second character on *The Beverly Hillbillies* in the final 1971 season named "Foster Phinney". The end of the decade found Lane playing a judge on the then-controversial ABC sitcom *Soap*.

He also had a recurring role on every incarnation of Lucille Ball's TV

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comedies. They had actually been friends since he met her back when she was a chorus girl in the RKO musicals. If she ever needed a bureaucratic foil, be he sourpuss or grouch, there he was. (Even in the maternity waiting room with Desi Arnez playing an unfazed father-to-be --of his 10th kid-- on the episode where little Ricky is born)

Lane continued to work regularly in the '50s and '60s appearing in such features as the only Abbott-less Costello entry *The 50 foot Bride of Candy Rock,* (pictured above) and *Teacher's Pet* with Clark Gable.
During this period of time Lane also appeared in the character actor tour de force, Universal's 1966 feature *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken* (below). .
Virtually every character actor working in Hollywood at the time had a role in this ghost-comedy (which also served as the first of several Don Knotts starring vehicles).

The only thing more impressive than his body of work was his longevity. Charles Lane looked like one of my grandfather's friends when I was a kid...And my Grandfather hasn't been around for almost 35 years now.
When asked, Lane himself said he had no formula for his longevity, although he noted his mother lived to be nearly 100.
He was a lifelong teetotaler, too. (Though his son noted that his pop DID smoke a pack of cigarettes a day for 70 years, and he quit only when he eventually became short of breath.

"I know that smoking kills people, and I must be the exception," Lane said then.

Charlie (as his friends knew him) was married to Ruth Covell for 71 years(!) until her death in 2002. The marriage produced a son, (Tom Lane)

and a daughter.

When Lane turned 100 in early 2005 he made an appearance on NBC's *The Today Show* and also on Nickelodeon's *TV Land* awards where he brought down the house by announcing "...In case anyone's interested, I'm still available." The above shot was taken in Santa Monica in 2005 as part of his 100th birthday celebration. The thing that Charles said he was most pleased by at this event was that this was the first time his name had ever appeared on a theater marquee.
He is survived by his daughter and only son Tom, who said on Tuesday there would be no funeral for his father.

A big thanks for this post go out to Taylor White, Tom Lane, Michael Stein and Filmfax magazine.

Labels: Charles Lane, Homer Bedloe, It's a Wonderful Life, Nosey, Petticoat Junction, The Ghost and Mr. Chicken, The Grouch, The Lucy Show

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